

Editorial from Gov. Brian Schweitzer:

Missourians and fellow citizens of the Missouri River Basin, I'm afraid I bring bad news. The upper basin reservoirs-in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota-have been drawn down to record lows, and there is currently no snow to replenish them. As the primary headwaters state for the basin, it is Montana's job to collect snow in the winter to feed our great rivers, including the Missouri. Mother nature has not enabled us to do our job very well for the past seven years, and each of those years has seen more snow than this one. Should the current weather pattern hold-and there is good reason to believe it will-we face severe impacts throughout the basin.

Here is where we are today: The Missouri River reservoirs currently hold slightly under half of their total capacity. In my state of Montana, Fort Peck Reservoir is 35 feet below normal-a full 10 feet lower than it was in the last record-breaking, basin-wide drought. The adverse economic effects in Montana are traumatic, but I'm not trying to advance the notion that we have suffered more than you. That line of argument has been used by every state in the basin, and has gotten all of us nowhere. I simply hope to sound the alarm that your uses of the river-the ones you care most about-are seriously threatened.

Experts believe it very likely that system storage in the Missouri River reservoirs will fall below 31 million acre-feet by March 15 of next year. If this occurs, it will trigger a navigation prelude, meaning there will be no barge navigation that year. Your average Missourian may not notice the lack of barges, but there are much more serious impacts: Poor mountain snow pack upstream may force Missouri cities to spend a great deal of money on emergency upgrades for public water supply intakes in order to provide drinking water to your citizens. Power plants may have to cut back on production or take emergency measures because there won't be enough water in the river to cool generation facilities. And the citizens of the Great State of Missouri will be stuck with bills that could have been avoided by cooperative, basin-wide drought planning.

How did all this happen? Obviously, we find ourselves in the midst of a multi-year drought, and there has simply been less water entering the system. But much of the water available over this period could have been saved to offset drought. Instead, the water has been utilized to support Missouri River navigation, an industry so small it has failed to sustain the few operators willing to float barges on the river. Missouri officials have been adamant in their support of navigation from the beginning, but betting on navigation as a means of keeping water flowing downstream to your state is risky. It may seem like a good tactic in a short drought, but this is not a short drought, and there is no sign it will end soon. So instead of having built up a "savings account" of water in upstream reservoirs to support drinking water and power production needs through the dry years, Missouri officials have effectively spent your savings account by draining the reservoirs for largely non-existent barge traffic. In short, these officials have lost a risky bet.

Today we could have five additional years of conserved water in the basin reservoirs, had your state officials since 1999 been willing to agree with the seven other basin states that conserving water in a drought is good for the entire basin. Missouri officials stood alone in those negotiations, and sadly the citizens of your state will be paying the price. We hope your state officials will now respond appropriately in support of emergency measures to conserve every drop of water possible, for the good of the people of Missouri and the entire basin.